

Remarks by H.E. Jeroen Vergeylen, Ambassador of Belgium to Hungary
on the occasion of the Conference “Hungarian EU Presidency with a historical background”
marking the 5th anniversary of the Otto von Habsburg Foundation
Pannonhalma, 30 June 2024

Archabbot of Pannonhalma,

Minister Tibor Navracsics,

Ambassador Pröhle,

Dear guests and friends of the Otto von Habsburg Foundation, and indeed friends of Otto von Habsburg himself,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a true pleasure to be back at Pannonhalma. It is my second visit. My first visit was on 11 November last year when the Abbey celebrated its traditional Saint Martin's Feast. Having been born myself in the City of Aalst in Belgium, which has Saint Martin as its patron saint, and having been educated, like my father and grandfather and my brothers, at the city's Saint Martin's College, I seem to have a personal connection – through Saint Martin – with this magnificent and inspiring place. Through my school years I was imbued with the values taught to us by Saint Martin's life. I am humbled to be able to address you today so near the place of Saint Martin's birth.

I am even more honoured to be here today as the monastic community of Pannonhalma is celebrating the eight-hundredth anniversary of the reconstruction and consecration of the Pannonhalma basilica and to pay tribute in this modest way to the commemoration of this extraordinary path of eight centuries.

All the more, therefore, would I like to extend my thanks for the warm welcome today and for inviting me as a speaker at this conference. I am not a historian, nor have I been connected to Otto von Habsburg, not even distantly, but as a Belgian I am a European with strong convictions about how the lessons of our common history have taught us that our common values must be protected, strengthened and advanced for the common good, and to prepare our future and that of our children. The best way to do that is to defend our European Union and to defend its values that are now enshrined in the Treaty, namely the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. It were the values that, I believe, Otto von Habsburg stood for during his long and active life and that provided the moral foundation for his pan-European vision and his vision for peace AND freedom in Europe.

His early years included a stay in Belgium as a student at the Catholic University of Leuven, where he obtained a doctorate in political science in 1935, and in Steenokkerzeel, where he lived with his mother and siblings at Castle Ham, from 1929 until 1940, when the family fled two days before the castle was bombed by the invading Nazi army. Of course, Otto von Habsburg's active life in European politics would bring him back to Belgium many times later on. We can assume that his education and formative years in Belgium have contributed to the indelible mark that he left on the European construction, or rather its “rediscovery”, and reunification.

My capacity here as Ambassador of His Majesty the King of the Belgians adds another dimension to my presence at Pannonhalma. As was beautifully explained by Dr. Gergely

Fejérdy, Princess Stéphanie of Belgium, who found her last resting place under the basilica, represents par excellence the close connections between our countries, Belgium and Hungary, and the fact that Otto von Habsburg's heart urn was buried next to her, symbolizes even more the deep historic and perhaps emotional connection between our countries.

I. Belgian-Hungarian Relations throughout History

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Unlike Dr. Fejérdy, you may not all be experts of Belgian-Hungarian relations, but I assume that most of you know that these relations are close and friendly, and that they are built on a long history of rich encounters and exchanges, on mutual respect and friendship.

We do not know exactly when the first encounters between Hungarians and Belgians took place, but they may not have been the happiest. There are historical accounts of Magyar raids on monasteries in southern Belgium, in the county of Hainaut and the duchy Brabant, in the year 956. But let me reassure you, not all encounters were that bloody. For more than one thousand years now, our relations have been very peaceful, a long period coinciding with the life-span of this Abbey.

For a long period our countries were both ruled by the Habsburg family, which stimulated commerce, scientific and cultural exchanges. A prominent figure was Mary of Hungary in the 16th century. She was a Brussels-born Habsburg princess, sister of the Emperor Charles V. At the age of 17, she moved to Buda and married the King of Hungary and Bohemia, Louis II, and hence became Queen of Hungary, but her husband died in the battle of Mohács in 1526. It is an interesting fact that Queen Mary appealed to her connections with the Southern Netherlands and got Flemish and Walloon soldiers to defend Buda against the Ottomans during the siege of Buda. In 1530, she was called back to become the Regent of the Southern Netherlands, at the request of her brother, Emperor Charles. But even after her return to Belgium, Queen Mary remained an active promoter of Belgian-Hungarian relations, fostering many cultural exchanges, the arts and music. There is abundant proof of that in the libraries of the Hungarian and Belgian aristocracy at the time, and who knows in the library of this Abbey too.

Later on, the links between our countries were not less abundant. Those of you who know Brussels will know that there is still a bridge in Brussels called "Buda" commemorating Buda's liberation from the Ottomans in the 17th century. During and after the 1848 revolution, Belgium, independent since 1830, welcomed many Hungarian freedom fighters who were exiled. Kossuth Lajos's mother is buried in Brussels at the cemetery of Etterbeek. The famous freedom fighter and writer Miklós Jósika fled to Brussels in 1850 and lived there for 15 years. After the revolution, during the dual monarchy that brought substantial growth to Hungary, commercial and cultural relations intensified considerably. Brussels and Budapest are both capitals of art nouveau, a European style par excellence. Belgian capital investments were instrumental for the development of the Hungarian railways and mine sector.

After the first world war, Belgium provided relief to Hungarian children and employed 6,000 Hungarian miners. Even during the second world war, Hungary and Belgium were never directly confronted. Hungary even sent humanitarian aid to Belgium. After the war, Belgium again welcomed Hungarian children and refugees. The same happened again after the 1956 revolution, when Belgium welcomed over 6,000 Hungarian immigrants. One of them was Lámfalussy Sándor, a student, who completed his studies in Belgium, also at the Catholic University of Leuven, where he co-founded the Collegium Hungaricum, a student home that still provides accommodation to Hungarian students in Leuven until this day. Lámfalussy obtained Belgian citizenship, and later became the founding father of the Euro as first

president of the European Monetary Institute. This year, the Euro is celebrating its 25th anniversary and is one of the great successes of European integration.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As you can see, the links between Brussels or Belgium and Hungary outdate the EU for centuries. I guess that the point I am really keen to make is that Brussels is not only the “source of all evil”. It is also the Belgian capital and a city that is intricately linked to Hungarian history and that has always welcomed Hungarians.

Today, Belgium and Hungary are close partners in the European Union and allies in NATO. We benefit from the security, stability and prosperity that the EU and NATO have provided to our citizens and companies over the last decades. Our bilateral trade amounted to 7 billion euros in 2023 and Belgium is the 14th investor in Hungary employing more than 9,000 Hungarians. This is only possible thanks to the EU’s single market, another great achievement of European integration that has brought so many advantages to both our countries, since Hungary joined the EU 20 years ago. Belgium and Hungary are both open economies, dependent on trade and investment, and characterized by a closely knit fabric of SMEs and family businesses. We have all to gain from working together. We are keen to cherish our close relationship and to make it future-proof.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This year, Belgium and Hungary, have an extraordinary opportunity to take up once more a leading role in Europe by exercising the Presidency of the Council of the European Union. This very day, the 30th of June, marks an extraordinary moment. It is the last day of the Belgian Presidency and tomorrow, in Brussels, the presidency will be handed over from my Prime Minister to the Prime Minister of Hungary. To be able to mark this day at Pannonhalma, is a great joy and auspicious occasion.

Let me take this opportunity to give you a brief and certainly incomplete overview of the most important achievements of the Belgian presidency that is now drawing to a close.

II. The most important achievements of the Belgian presidency

During the last six months, important legislative and political results were achieved in order to protect EU citizens, strengthen Europe’s competitiveness, and make the EU future-proof. In all modesty, we think it is fair to conclude that Belgium successfully accomplished its presidency’s triple objective to drive forward an ambitious legislative agenda, to effectively respond to ongoing challenges and crises facing the EU, and to prepare the debate on Europe’s future.

First, driving forward the legislative work.

One of the presidency’s main achievements is that it has closed 74 agreements and found 57 Council-level negotiating mandates. We are proud of this because it demonstrates the Belgian ‘culture of compromise’. Indeed, chairing the Council means that you have to find consensus between the 27 Member States and with the European institutions, to broker agreements, so that the legislative work can move forward and that decisions are taken.

I will not list all these legislative achievements individually, the list is available online, but let me summarise the legislative work by saying that substantial progress was achievement in all six priority areas :

- 1) Defending the rule of law, democracy and unity
- 2) Strengthening the EU's competitiveness
- 3) Pursuing a green and just transition
- 4) Reinforcing our social and health agenda
- 5) Protecting people and borders
- 6) Promoting a global Europe

The second objective was responding to crises.

The Belgian Presidency reaffirmed its unwavering support to Ukraine in its fight against Russian aggression through:

- Agreements on the Ukraine Facility of 50 billion euros from the EU budget, the Ukraine Assistance Fund of 5 billion euros via the European Peace Facility, the extension of autonomous trade measures on Ukrainian exports, and the transfer of contributions on profits made from immobilised Russian assets to support Ukraine;
- We also achieved the imposition of the 13th and the 14th sanctions package against Russia;
- The facilitation of progress on Ukraine's accession process, with the opening of accession negotiations.

The Belgian Presidency also worked to counteract further escalation of the conflict in the Middle East by finding common ground for (re-) engagement with UNRWA, launching an EU military operation contributing to maritime security in the Red Sea, and adopting sanctions against members of Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad as well as against violent Israeli settlers in the West Bank.

The Belgian presidency responded to the conflict in Eastern DRC through work on sanctions against those supporting, fuelling or profiting from the conflict.

The Belgian presidency took action to protect Europe's democratic processes against external threats by starting the work on the Defence of Democracy Package and activating the *Integrated Political Crisis Response* (IPCR) mechanism in view of the European elections.

The Belgian presidency responded to European farmers' distress and helped realise a more just transition in the agricultural sector by successfully working to revise and simplify the Common Agricultural Policy.

The third objective was to preparing Europe's future.

The Belgian Presidency fuelled the discussions in preparation of the next EU Strategic Agenda that was adopted during the European Council in Brussels last Thursday. The Strategic Agenda is an important document that will lay the foundations for a thriving EU for the next five years, until 2029.

To help make the EU future-proof, the Belgian presidency also prepared a Progress Report on the Future of Europe which includes a Roadmap for future work on internal reforms. In this effort, it took into account the triple challenge of retaining and improving the EU's internal functioning and capacity to act, while adapting to a new geopolitical reality, and preparing for enlargement. Broad agreement emerged that reforms should focus on values, policies, budget and governance.

As part of these reflections and to boost the Union's competitiveness, secure its economic resilience and achieve the full potential of the Single Market, the Presidency also presented

also a Stocktaking Note on Competitiveness. This report outlines the progress made in all competitiveness-related policy fields by the Belgian Presidency, and previewed further work needed to bolster European competitiveness in the future, with a focus on the Single Market and the Union's governance and finances.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

At the start of the Presidency, our commitment was to deliver, and honour the reputation of the famous Belgian compromise. It is safe to say that we have kept our promise in terms of brokering agreements. We kept our promise of "protecting, strengthening and preparing" the EU with an eye to the immediate present, as well as the long-term future.

Belgium has been working to ensure a smooth transition to the Hungarian Presidency, which will take over on 1 July.

III. Handing over to Hungary

To conclude, a few words on our expectations regarding the Hungarian Presidency, from a Belgian perspective. First of all, the Hungarian diplomats and officials are very well prepared and very competent, and we expect them to run a very smooth and well-organised presidency. The timeframe will be special. The European Parliament and European Commission will be in a transition phase, so the Council will ensure the continuity, and that will be the responsibility of the Hungarian Presidency.

In terms of legislative work, we expect the Hungarian Presidency to take forward the work on the competitiveness agenda, which includes turning the Green Deal into a comparative advantage. The ingredients are on the table, now we have to start cooking. Secondly, building a solid European Defence Union will be a central topic. The Hungarian Presidency will be in the driving seat to advance the Commission's proposal on a the defence industry strategy and programme. Thirdly, the migration and asylum pact needs implementing measures. Fourthly, the support for Ukraine in all its dimensions will need follow-up and continuous attention from the Council. Fifthly, the enlargement negotiations with the aspiring countries need to be carried on effectively with a scrupulous attention to the respect of the criteria in order to safeguard the credibility of the enlargement agenda. Lastly, the EU's internal reform process will need to become more concrete and put on the rails.

For all this, Hungary will be able to count on Belgium's support, in line with our long-standing relations, in a spirit of sincere cooperation in order to protect the legacy of the founding fathers of the EU, namely to protect the citizens of the EU, to strengthen our economies in a sustainable way, and to prepare our future which much remain true to our values, which are the values that motivated Otto von Habsburg's work, and which were undoubtedly also the values that Saint Martin could have supported.

Let me reiterate my profound gratitude to the community of Pannonhalma for welcoming me today, and to the Otto von Habsburg Foundation, to which I extend my warm congratulations on its 5th anniversary, for organizing this wonderful gathering.

Köszönöm szépen.